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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN PARLIAMENT RATIFIES EU ACCESSION TREATY, RULING PARTY EYES ELECTORAL BOOST

Ref: (A) SOFIA 780 (B) SOFIA 623

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Bulgaria's parliament ratified May 11 the EU accession treaty, as another step on the way to join the European Union on January 1, 2007. The document, signed in Luxembourg on April 25, passed with 231 votes in favor, one against and two abstentions. To come into force, the treaty must be ratified by all current EU member states before 2007. Bulgaria's self-imposed speedy ratification is motivated predominantly by domestic political pressure. PM Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha's ruling party hopes to use Bulgaria's impending EU membership to boost its chances for the June general elections. END SUMMARY

2. (SBU) Bulgaria, as well as neighboring Romania, completed EU entry talks in 2004 and signed the accession treaty on April 25, 2005 in Luxembourg (Ref. A). Bulgarian officials claim the speedy ratification is intended to help kick-off the ratification process by member states, especially given the uncertainty surrounding the May 29 EU Constitution Referendum in France. However, Bulgaria's self-imposed rush is motivated mostly by the domestic political calendar. The PM's ruling party hopes the ratification will give the party a boost in the June 25 elections. The ex-king movement faces a strong challenge by the main opposition Socialists who, according to recent polls retain nearly a 10 percent lead (Ref. B).

3. (U) In a speech to parliament, PM Saxe-Coburg said the historic decision should motivate Bulgaria to work harder to achieve its target EU entry date. Parliament speaker Borislav Velikov termed the ratification a milestone in Bulgaria's post-communist history while Nikolay Mladenov from the center-right opposition UDF said it should put an end to Bulgarians' fears that the EU is a prestigious club closed to the small Balkan nation. Socialist leader Sergei Stanishev hailed the ratification, but pointed to the lack of transparency surrounding the obligations that the government has undertaken as part of the treaty. Former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov, whose center-right government launched the EU entry talks in 1999, noted the country needed to do more to reform its judicial system and strengthen the rule of law. These areas are seen by the EU as the greatest threat to successful accession.

4. (SBU) The ruling party's efforts to gain public support by boasting about its EU accession achievements suffered a setback last week. On May 5, the two biggest groups in the European Parliament - the conservative European People's Party and the Party of the European Socialists - proposed delaying observer status for the new parliamentarians from Bulgaria and Romania until 1 January 2006, or 1 January 2007 in the event of the activation of the safeguard clause. In comparison, the 10 new members that joined as part of the 2004 wave of accession were invited to send representatives to the EU parliament as soon as they signed the treaty. Bulgaria will be entitled to send 18 representatives. Government officials put a brave face to the news, which made front-page headlines in Bulgaria. PM Saxe-Coburg said it would not affect Bulgaria's EU accession, EU Minister Meglena Kuneva termed it "a tempest in a teapot" and Foreign Minister Passy noted that Bulgaria has already been granted an observer status in the European Commission and the European Council. However, the European Parliament's decision could scale down the ruling party's plans to use the EU as a key theme in the one-month election campaign that starts May 25.

5. (SBU) COMMENT: Whether or not its efforts on behalf of EU accession gain the PM's party additional vote remains to be seen. However, it is clear that Bulgarians of all political stripes are committed to moving forward on the EU accession, even if they don't fully understand the responsibilities and benefits membership grants. END COMMENT